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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the process of ethnographic research and some reasons it might not go as smoothly as researchers or funders have planned. The paper's orientation is from that of a folklorist, but some of the cautionary matter may apply as well to oral historians and others involved in multicultural projects. The research was to conduct 15-20 life historical interviews within 7 months in 1990-91 to document life histories and life cycle rituals in the Cambodian community in Philadelphia. Although several Cambodians were contacted and provided information, only two interviews were conducted during this time. The report covers four areas that had a significant impact on the success or failure of this project and may affect other multicultural projects in general: (1) time: It takes time to understand a new culture; also, people have other things going on in their lives; (2) language: When using translators, interviews became more complex; non-verbal forms of communication are important to understand; (3) gender: When gender relations are constructed differently it affects the interview process; and (4) politics: The varying political opinions of the Cambodians in the U.S. affect the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and construction of the oral narrative. These topics should be given more attention when ethnographers evaluate their work. Ten notes contain approximately 13 references. (EH)

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Taking Time and Proceeding with Caution: Time and Process in a Cambodian Life History Documentation Project, by William Westerman

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TAKING TIME AND PROCEEDING WITH CAUTION:
TIME AND PROCESS IN A CAMBODIAN LIFE HISTORY DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the process of ethnographic research and some of the reasons it might not go as smoothly as either we or our funders have planned. In particular I want to cover four areas that have a big impact on the success or failure of our projects (depending on our evaluation!) which I believe should be given more attention when ethnographers evaluate their own work. These topics are **time**, **language**, **gender**, and **politics**. My orientation is that of a folklorist, but some of this cautionary matter may apply as well to oral historians and others involved in multicultural projects.

I will be drawing on my experiences in documenting Cambodian life histories for the Philadelphia Folklore Project, an independent non-profit organization founded in 1987. Among other activities, the Folklore Project has undertaken ethnographic research with the Italian and African American communities of Philadelphia, and on family businesses and neighborhood gardens. Two folklorists, myself and Surihu, were hired by director Debora Kodish in November of 1990 to begin research and documentation of life histories and life cycle rituals (weddings, funerals) in the Cambodian community in Philadelphia. The initial goal of the project was to carry out 15-20 life historical interviews within seven months in 1990-1991, and to prepare a photo exhibition, entitled "Bamboo Shoots Grow Up to Be Bamboo: Khmer Traditions in Cambodia and Philadelphia" which opened at the Samuel Fleisher Art Memorial in March, 1991. By May of 1991, we had taped two interviews, but we have gotten to know many people in the community. At the beginning, neither of us had had direct experience with Cambodian culture; Surihu, a folklorist from Inner Mongolia, had worked in his own culture, and I had worked in my country with other newly arrived refugees, Central Americans. So, while we came to this with differing

interests and some background knowledge, we were starting from scratch and with no Khmer language skills.

Time

In looking back and considering why we fell so far short of our goal of recording twenty interviews (or "products"), I have been asking myself, Why do things take so much time? Is it me—and I'm sure all of us have had these doubts at one time or another—am I incompetent, or are these things always more time consuming than they at first appear? So I started to think about time.

Chamroeun Yin is a 33-year-old Cambodian tailor and classical dancer who has been performing in this country since 1981. Because of his artistic talents he has worked with folklorists from the U.S., and in addition he has numerous friends who are American-born, of European descent, and English-speaking (what Cambodians call "American"). Only the second time I met him, and the first time I spent time alone with him, he told me about life under the Khmer Rouge: about working seven days a week for four years in horrible conditions, sleeping on the ground even in the rain, with no more than a teaspoon of rice in a cup of water for a meal; about what happened if someone tried to escape and got caught, and how such people would be killed by the soldiers, either shot, or more likely killed with a knife or sharpened stick in the throat with the body then cut open and the heart ripped out. About the starvation Chamroeun told me how he would eat anything to stay alive, even snakes, dogs, and rats, which he told me many Cambodians in America wouldn't admit because of how Americans might react. I didn't ask him much, mostly I just listened as we drove, but I did ask if it was hard for people to talk about this, and he told me no, that Cambodians liked to talk about this to tell everyone what went on.

In contrast, Wutha Chin is a college student and full-time tutor in the Philadelphia public school system whom the Folklore Project hired as a researcher and translator. We met in December, but it was not until early March, after we had worked extensively together on translating photo captions for our bilingual photo exhibition, that he told me in the car one day

about how his parents were "sent out" to be re-educated, and never returned, how he was arrested at age 9, led through the forest for two days in chains, and then imprisoned, for stealing a tomato, and how he lost his sister during their escape from jail. I had only asked a few questions, namely how he lost his parents (once I got to know him well enough to ascertain that they were no longer living), and he brought up other topics. I tried gently to ask him to clarify details. He described how Khmer Rouge soldiers would toss babies up in the air and spear them on the end of sharpened bamboo poles, commenting, when I asked if he had seen that himself (which he had), that Americans often don't believe this. He had brought up the more general topics, and I asked him details when it seemed appropriate.

So far these are the two people in the Cambodian community I have gotten to know best, and these experiences say a few things about the nature of time and fieldwork that I think are worth emphasizing. First of all, I can't help noticing that they reveal a certain shyness on my part and a reluctance to ask potentially painful, direct questions. I also find cars, with their lateral, side-by-side seating arrangements, far less threatening than opposing, eyeball-to-eyeball questioning, at least for opening up this kind of discussion. But these episodes also reveal some basic truisms about time and fieldwork, and about dealing with people, things so obvious in our own everyday dealings that we can easily forget them in the field: namely, that it takes time to build relationships, and different people begin to trust and reveal things about themselves at different speeds, based on their own experience, their personality, their judgments about who you are, or your relationship to mutual acquaintances. Chamroeun had not only worked with folklorists before, but he met me through Debora Kodish, the Folklore Project director, with whom he already had some rapport. It takes time to build trust and friendship.

It also takes patience to build that trusting relationship, and it was reinforced to me in the course of this work that ours is not a patient culture (in fact the most often voiced criticism of President Bush around the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War was that he didn't show enough patience). Working with Cambodians has heightened my awareness of an American cultural ideal of efficiency and product-oriented achievement, often at the expense of human relationships, where

Cambodian relationships may proceed at a different pace altogether—another important differential time factor.

It takes time to understand a new culture. We need to be patient just to learn what is and what is not appropriate to discuss and to ask among strangers and among friends. We need to learn what the boundaries are between what is acceptable to talk about and what is too painful. We need to learn who can talk with us and who wants to. And all this, I maintain, is not an intuitive process. We need to feel our way around a new territory, exploring the pitfalls and hazards, though sometimes we may be doing this in the dark. Every culture, after all, has its own rules and standards for such relationships.

Furthermore, in any community, we have to recognize that people have other things going on in their lives. For researchers the project may be of primary importance, but the narrators and sources may have other priorities. If our work is to be a partnership, we may be asked to help in subjects' projects, personal or otherwise, and to accept their timelines. Work, school, family situations, crises—if we look upon these as impediments to achieving a predetermined research goal we will be frustrated, but genuinely caring about members of a community means taking time to understand the rhythms of their lives and working in harmony with them. We may choose to make these priorities our own, or be guided by them, or at the very least respect them,[1] but if we don't learn to see these priorities, we will be needlessly narrow in our research. We will also fail to build an egalitarian relationship with the members of the community, in which the researchers do not dominate the structure or nature of the dialogue and neither intimidate nor belittle the people being interviewed, as all too often happens in the social sciences.[2]

If we do intend to form a partnership in the exchange of ideas and information, maintain an egalitarian relationship, and recognize that the individuals and communities involved have their own needs and wants, then we must also stay around after the interviewing is over. The very afternoon our exhibit opened, we were frantically preparing bilingual text panels for the photos. Daran Kravanh was typing the Khmer language captions on a word processor. We had interviewed him about his escape from Cambodia and he had spoken of using his skills as an

accordionist to survive during and after the Khmer Rouge regime—at one point performing for soldiers dispatched to kill him, inspiring them to dance rather than carry out their mission. After living in Philadelphia for nearly two years, he was moving with his wife and two sons to Tacoma, Washington the day after the exhibit opening. As he was one of the few typists we had met fully literate in Khmer, we had conscripted him into our service, despite his frantic schedule such as we all face when undergoing a move even under the best of circumstances. While another typist finished the labels, Daran asked me to drive him across town to pick up two letters from his brother, which an American Friends Service Committee staff member had just brought back from Cambodia. I had been up all night and didn't feel like driving, but as our opening was that evening, and he was leaving the next day, we had no choice. We picked up the letters, which he opened immediately upon getting back to my car. As we drove back, he read them, and in one he discovered that his brother had enclosed an old family photograph, circa 1961, that had somehow safely been hidden from the Khmer Rouge. This was the first time he had seen pictures of his parents at least since he left Cambodia in 1984, and possibly since the Khmer Rouge had been in power. His parents had been killed. He got goose pimples up and down his arms (which he showed me), and already I could hear the emotion in his voice when he told me about the first letter. He started to tell me about the photo: "You know, my mother and father," he began, and then he burst into tears. As we drove up Chew Avenue, I tried to pay attention to the traffic and think of what to say, while Daran wept in the seat next to me. I thought of the exhibit we were opening that night, which tried to convey and explain, through visual images, captions, and texts based on interviews, the importance that family photographs held for Cambodian refugees living in Philadelphia, but that ride in the car bespoke more about Cambodian history on a personal level than any description we could have written and more than we would be likely to learn from a quick process of interviewing. Had we ended the relationship when we shut off the tape recorder or limited ourselves to what we needed to get done by our exhibit deadline, we would have ended our ability to learn from the relationship and limited ourselves to our own paradigm of what constitutes research, meaning, and history.

Finally, about the nature of time and interviewing, it is all too easy, when working against a project deadline, whether extrinsic or self-imposed, to begin to value people because of the information they hold rather than who they are. History is not a commodity, and "the story" a person may tell us cannot become the little treasure of our scavenger hunt, or the pearl for which we are diving. In the case of our Project the ultimate goal is not just a certain number of stories or a quantity of information. Instead, what we hope to explore by the end is the relationship those personal and cultural histories and those narratives have to the people who tell them, and who live with that memory every day. We are interested in how the history as remembered is coupled with the arts and culture as currently practiced and the impact that has on people's lives. No story or text taken out of context will explain that. Only the long, slow painstaking process of situating the stories in their own personal, cultural, and historical contexts[3] will help us to understand better what people have gone through and how they reconcile that experience with survival in a new environment. It is that situating that gives meaning to stories and artistic processes which we might otherwise ignorantly overlook, or which might exemplify double and triple meanings and highlight subtle relationships between people, ideas, and traditions. Without the background contexts we (and most policy-makers) are often in fact blind to the subject before us. Unfortunately, the recognition of contextual background—let alone its comprehension and appreciation—also takes time, often more time than we seem to have.

When I use the term "commodity" I mean something quite distinct from "text." While I think there is a danger in reducing a history to a series of discrete oral texts, by "commodity" I refer specifically the use of those texts as items of value, that can become an exchange medium for some form of remuneration. In a perceptive article on refugee studies, folklorist Margaret Mills writes:

> One striking effect of the refugee experience is this commodification of the refugee's story. A story of flight that conforms to the service providers' definition of 'proper' refugee status is exchanged for such things as goods, services, and visas to desirable countries of secondary refuge.[4]

In our search for quotable texts and "good stories," we may fall into the trap of reducing someone's life into an item of trade: either "you tell us your story and we'll help you with what you need," or worse, "you tell us your story, and we can use it in our next grant proposal (so we can come back and work some more in this community)." Texts, deposited on tape in an archive, or transcribed and published, can be beneficial and interesting to members of both the community and the dominant society. It is obvious that the physical reality of publications and cassettes imposes a "beginning" and an "end" on texts—which may be different from the narrator's boundaries or some absolute beginning and end. Commodities, in contrast, become "the goods," their existence as "things" being more valuable than their textual contents and interpretations, let alone the contextual and historical backgrounds they illuminate or, even beyond that, the personal relationships that develop in the process of historical exploration and narration.[5]

In her article, Margaret Mills further notes that

> Not only folklorists or others who document culture but also community workers of all kinds who organize and facilitate cultural performances, have a role to play in making refugee voices audible to both policy makers and to the general public. If successful, this audibility means political empowerment and autonomy (not just service provision) for the oppressed groups.[6]

In other words, when we see refugees as real individual persons and expressive artisans in their own culture, it becomes difficult to help them in a paternalistic or disempowering way. This paternalism can be all too tempting to American refugee assisters and, I dare say, to ethnographers too. In sum, we have to see the story as more than just commodity, and the community as much more than keepers of a treasure or victims to be helped by our noble efforts.

Language

In a notable sociolinguistic study by the anthropologist Keith Basso, he writes that among Western Apache communities, an Anglo stranger who comes into the community and speaks too much, too soon is suspected of "want[ing] something." "Strangers who are quick to launch into conversation," Basso notes, "are frequently eyed with undisguised suspicion."[7] Elsewhere he

notes that, "For a stranger entering an alien society, a knowledge of when *not* to speak may be as basic to the production of culturally acceptable behavior as a knowledge of what to say."[8]

When we commence an oral history project in our own culture, we may be aware of when it is appropriate or not appropriate to speak and what to say or ask (although academics are notoriously bad even at this, as many interview subjects will tell you from personal experience). But upon entering a radically different culture—even, deceptively, in our own city—the rules change. I was fortunate, in that Chamroeun quickly warned me about certain rules of politeness in meeting Cambodians, and he was more direct and forthcoming than other Cambodians might have been. And I was fortunate, in speaking only English, to be able to sidestep the considerable variety of Khmer forms of address, in which persons of different age, gender, and relationship to the speaker are distinguished and through which the speaker becomes situated in a context of age, class, gender, and even history. In other words, as a stranger who didn't speak the language, there was a limit as to how inappropriate I could be.

Not knowing the rules, however, the first criterion to become apparent to me concerning proper address was age. Cambodian culture, traditionally, has strict rules about talking back to, or up to, elders, who are not to be disagreed with or argued with, and to whom great respect must be shown. In Cambodia, written and spoken language were changed, when the Khmer Rouge closed schools and drastically altered forms of address, so the Khmer that younger people speak and write, if they can, is vastly different from that of an older Cambodian educated before the war. The situation here, in this country, has become radically reversed, since often children will develop a greater command of English than their parents and grandparents, and will thus be more able to negotiate in the English-speaking society, thus reversing the roles and making the elders dependent on them. Language acquisition, from young to old rather than the other way around, has subverted the social structure. Despite this, there are still rules that respectful younger Cambodians will obey.

What are the implications, then, of being a 29-year-old ethnographer? What is the impact of my age on the accessibility of older people in the community? Are there questions it's not

appropriate for me to ask? If I am working with a translator even younger than myself, can they pose questions to older people even if I can? With great respect, older people can be addressed, but what is the culturally correct method of conveying history and values, by asking, or by waiting until you are told?

During the course of my initial fieldwork, I became age-ambiguous. As a student and as an unmarried person, relating to younger people proved easier than it might otherwise have been. Despite that, younger people did recognize my chronological age and professional status, and occasionally asked me to mediate with older people whom they felt uncomfortable approaching directly. (Conflict might not be directly resolved from younger to older, but perhaps intermediaries of in-between ages can be approached as conflicts can be discussed going up the age ladder step by step). Again, age might not have been the only factor at play here; my status as cultural outsider and U.S.-born American may also have placed me at a more liminal, neutral point.

Adding to the amibiguity, on a humorous note, was the fact that I took on an unexpected role as driver of a group of dance students to classical dance class. The dancers ranged in age from 8 to 25, and every Saturday we would provide door-to-door service to the rehearsals and home again. The conversation in the car was most often in Khmer, and I drove in silent ignorance. I learned, however, after one particularly noticeable burst of laughter, that my nickname—following the Cambodian tradition of addressing people by terms of familial relation, even when there is no actual relationship—had become "Grandfather Bill." This was playful and no doubt referred to my role as driver, but also underscored in a way, a slight tension between my actual age and marital status on the one hand, and my position as harmless, safe adult, permitted to drive young unmarried women and girls from place to place. This story also exemplifies how completely dependent on translation I am, as well as how the perception of my age is contingent on my position as folklorist, driver, carowner, and so on. But what are the implications of this in interviewing?

In addition, the issues of translation prove to be complex and could be the subject of an entirely separate paper. Because we are dealing with a community in which English is the second

(if not third or fourth) language, we have been committed to conducting our interviews in Khmer. To that end, we hired four translator-researchers: two college students—Wutha Chin, whom I mentioned above, and Leendavy Koung, herself a classical dancer and musician—and two high school seniors, Prolung Ngin and Yoeun Him. As oral historians well recognize, the dynamics between two people during an interview are complicated enough, so you can imagine how things become even more complex when a third person enters the discussion, particularly when that person functions as translator, essentially carrying on one conversation with the subject and a separate conversation with the interviewer. The process of doing interviews, then, becomes a process of negotiation between two interviewers, really, in order to decide what questions should be asked and when the flow of the interview should be interrupted in order to translate the words back into English. This has produced, we hope, some interesting collaboration between native ethnographers and formally trained fieldworkers. We are striving, too, to avoid paternalism in this research, particularly since the age barrier can be an impediment to our Project's cultural ideal of egalitarian dialogue.

I should also at least mention, on the subject of language, non-verbal forms of communication. I am still mapping out, for example, completely different rules of touching and physical contact. What role does this have in an oral history project? What is an appropriate physical or verbal response on my part when someone I am interviewing begins to cry as we discuss painful topics? What are the non-verbal cues that I'm missing when someone wants to tell me they don't want to be interviewed any further, or they don't think I should be asking a certain question, and how can I be sure they are not answering me out of a sense of obligation? I did have one person, an ethnic Chinese Cambodian, flatly refuse to be interviewed, but I was so slow on the uptake that I feared I did permanent damage to the relationship. How to avoid that? And, on a more amusing note, since I have had so much luck talking with friends while driving, is side-by-side interviewing preferable to face-to-face potentially more confrontational interviews? Again, it takes time, and with luck, someone to articulate these things, in order to avoid betraying oneself as yet another insensitive outsider.

Gender

What happens when two male fieldworkers enter a community of Cambodians and begin to ask questions? If our approach had been to set up formal interviews as quickly as possible, things might have unfolded differently, but given that my method for entering the community involved spending time hanging out, conversing, driving in cars, collecting photos for our exhibit, and visiting families, I ended up spending a lot more time with young men roughly in my age group (19-32), most of whom were unmarried. In taking the time to learn more about Cambodian culture, I became fairly quickly aware of stricter gender roles than I had previously known, and typically, I started to learn this by making a mistake.

When we had set out to interview Daran Kravanh, I asked Prolung Ngin, a high school senior, if she would accompany me as translator. We went after school, and I expected to begin the interview around 4:30 or 5 and conclude by 7:30 at the latest. I was not prepared for the length of introductory socializing that began the meeting nor for eating dinner, all of which took precedence over doing the formal interview, which, in fact, didn't begin until nearly 7 o'clock. Slightly after 9, when Daran concluded his narrative, Prolung made her way over to the phone, to call her mother and tell her she would be home later than expected. Unbeknownst to me at the time, Daran's wife, Ros Darachan, got on the phone to explain to Prolung's mother that everything was legitimate and safe, that she, another woman, was present. Prolung's mother, in fact, had suggested that she quit the job. Darachan's intervention had been pivotal in reducing the tension between Prolung and myself, and between Prolung and her mother. What I learned from talking to Prolung in the car driving her back to her house, was that for a young unmarried male to stay out late with a young female was a very charged and inappropriate situation, and was generally not done.

Subsequently other events came into focus: the community leader who called the parents of all the young female dance students to introduce me, the driver, to them as a responsible and mature adult, the newly married husband who left his wife at home when he went to a party, the shyness of the other woman we hired as a translator, Leendavy Koung, when I asked her if she

wanted to work with us as an interviewer and contrasted with her enthusiasm when Debora Kodish, the Project director, asked her the same thing, that same translator's reluctance to address a group of male folk dancers because she didn't know how what she had to say would sound "coming from a girl." I hope during the course of the next few months to get to know some of the young women better, because I see them dealing with the old roles and the new society in very interesting ways.

I've asked at a number of parties and dances where the women were, and was told that they were home. I think—at least according to the perception of the men—that the women's realm in Cambodian society is much more private and home oriented, while males see their realm as more public. In one recent conversation, for example, I asked Wutha Chin how a particular male friend of his was whom I hadn't seen in a while. He said he was fine, just that he was quiet and often stays at home, commenting, "He's like a woman," without a hint of ridicule. It will be important to discuss these issues with women in the community, but to reiterate, a young unmarried man coming into such a community and quickly doing a round of interviews would probably unnessarily skew the picture in favor of a male perspective on historical events and artistic traditions. Again, time, depth, and fieldwork beyond the interview process can allow for trust and balance in representing both female and male perspectives and traditions, and for trust (and eventually, then, permission) to move past more "traditional" categories, particularly when within the framework of a larger culture whose own gender relations are rather differently constructed.

Politics

Finally, I turn to what is so often unfortunately left out of many ethnographic studies, particularly out of refugee studies, as odd as that seems. How necessary is it, I ask, to be familiar with the political and historical background of a group (particularly when political and historical forces have brought about their arrival in Philadelphia in the first place)?

Let me begin this section by confessing my own ignorance at the beginning of this project. I had of course read a little (that is, read newspapers) about the war in Cambodia, and I was even

aware of the U.S. invasion and bombing in 1970, heavier bombing than that to which we had subjected Japan during all of World War II. But I had naively assumed most Cambodians in the U.S. would be of one political stripe: vehemently anti-communist and somewhere far on the right of the American political spectrum. I thought that memories of Khmer Rouge atrocities would well have wiped out local knowledge of the U.S. war, corrupt government, and mistreatment in Thai refugee camps and as potential new Americans, as well as varieties of political opinion and reactios to American racism. What surprised me—and what I learned only by discussing politics in non-interview, non-threatening situations—was the wide range of political opinion of Cambodians in the U.S. This became important, because the construction of oral narratives was often based on their varying interpretation of their own political history. Not unexpectedly, most of what I have read in newspaper and popular accounts focuses only on the Khmer Rouge regime and its incomprehensible mechanism of repression. But side by side with those images that people have described for me are other more surprising scenes, such as a young boy being taken back to his childhood home by his father, who shows him the crater in front of their house made by an American. I have also been asked, in an almost accusing tone, why my country continued to support the rebel coalition fighting in Cambodia even though a sizeable faction of the coalition was comprised of the Khmer Rouge under the command of Pol Pot—and I was asked precisely <u>because</u> this is my country. As ethnographers we are judged as Americans, for better or worse, and should know what that can imply. It will color the oral histories we are told, as those statements which could be potentially threatening and challenging to us are likely to be edited out by interview subjects.[9] We have to know about things like class and regional differences in both our own culture and the culture we are studying, so we can better watch how an immigrant culture stratifies itself in a matter of years before our very eyes. We have to avoid exoticism and orientalism, and falling into an intellectual tourism. And we have to be politically sophisticated about operating in our own culture: being able to do the honest and rigorous work we want without being compromised by grantors and funders, being conscious of our own processes of self-censorship, helping with the legal and educational system when new immigrants are taken

advantage of by the opportunists in our culture, understanding the politics of Cambodian-American relations in the U.S. and recognizing who the Americans are that most Cambodians deal with daily (i.e. teachers, landlords, police, welfare caseworkers, and so on), and finally reporting on what we have learned without jeopardizing the security or trust of the people we have met and the friends we have made. And all that, not surprisingly, takes time and patience.

It is also a political process. Again, Margaret Mills discusses the political nature of who we as ethnographers are in our culture and who we represent to the people we interview:

> The very impersonality of this [policy] scholarship of human suffering reminds us that the choice of any mode of documentation, even prior to its analysis, is a political act, both in roots and consequences. The intense personal experiences and intellectual and ethical stands of refugees, which they often articulate in powerful words and cultural performances, are systematically filtered out of most policy-oriented literature. The politics of our scholarship censors and mutes these voices in favor of interpretive authority granted to the outside scholar, though refugee voices remain powerfully, often frustratingly audible to front-line refugee service providers.[10]

The political and power relationships that we have with members of the community (as opposed to more policy-oriented fieldworkers) have implications for the kind of process and products we develop cooperatively. Since we are not so much representatives of official culture as we are its mediators, we therefore need to worry less about the constraints of social service bureaucracy. And, though we as scholars often see the official system in all its puzzling, unreasonable, and heartless dimensions (and only sometimes understand why) we are more in a position to play with that system from our liminal vantage point. The contradictions of participant observation can be put to good use; in equal collaboration we can glide back and forth between participation and observation, between partnership and policy, between equality and elucidation. Our designs and our work can reflect that.

My intent in this paper has been to show that if an oral history project is planned, scheduled, targeted, and executed like some kind of safari, from the folklorist's perspective, we do not do full justice either to ourselves or to the communities involved. We have to be open to negotiation and adjustment in the process, open to the unexpected, and open to our mistakes.

Sometimes the topic at hand is not the only or the most instructive topic at the time. During the recent Persian Gulf War, it was often conversations with the Cambodians that kept me sane (even though I did spot the occasional Desert Storm t-shirt and yellow ribbon). But overall, spending time with civilian refugees who knew the real effects of war not only helped me feel secure that my own feelings of horror and sadness were indeed justifiable, but through the replaying of that war was I able to see more about the intangibles of the refugee experience. Daran Kravanh taught me a proverb soon after the war broke out: "When the elephants fight, the ants and the grass get killed." The context of one monstrous and indiscriminate war for me sh[illegible]d light on the flight of other people from another war. Such history takes so long to unfold; why do we think that, even in recollection, it can be so neatly compressed?

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region Conference held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, May 3, 1991. My thanks to Joel Gardner for his original invitation and encouragement, and to Debora Kodish, Chamroeun Yin, Daran Kravanh, Prolung Ngin, and Wutha Chin, who read and commented upon the earlier paper. That version was also presented at the graduate, interdisciplinary Program to Assess and Revitalize the Social Sciences (PARSS) Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania. I am grateful to Barry Dornfeld, Ruth Olson, Susan Garfinkel, Paul Hanson, and Dorothy Noyes for their helpful insights at that seminar.

[1]Debora Kodish has pointed out, in personal communication, some options available to us in attending to the priorities of community members, and in making the distinction between egalitarian relationships (which implies a non-hierarchical relationship), and exchange, which implies each party's participating in some action on the other's behalf.

[2]As well as in law and medicine and our educational system, etc. For a further discussion of this ideal, see Alessandro Portelli, "Research as an Experiment in Equality," in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1991), pp. 29-44. The topic is also discussed among other places in Archie Green, "At the Hall, In the Stope: Who Treasures Tales of Work?" *Western Folklore* 46 (1987): 153-170, David Kerr, "On Not Becoming a Folklorist: Field Methodology and the Reproduction of Underdevelopment," *Folklore* (London) 102 (1991): 48-61, and most recently in Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Notes Toward a European-American Folk Aesthetic: Lessons Learned from Singers and Storytellers I Have Known," *Journal of American Folklore* 104 (1991): 164-178, though I am taking some of his ideas somewhat further. The idea that members of a community have their own priorities and needs has received surprisingly little attention in fieldwork manuals and reports. See William Lynwood Montell, "The Human Side of Folklore Fieldwork," *The Folklore Historian* 7 (1990): 5-15, esp. p. 13, Kenneth S. Goldstein, *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1964), pp. 170-1, and Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *People Studying People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 60, in their discussion of William Wiser and Charlotte Viall Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls, 1930-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. vi-viii, xiii-xiv, 12-13, 100, 113-115. The Wisers were, after all, missionaries, but their words can be appropriate. In discussing their "neighborly activities," they write that "the road of friendship and service is courteous and just, if not the most efficient." In

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sum, the question of needs requires further discussion. Similarly, the fact that folklore and oral history fieldwork and research can actually benefit the community involved is also not yet a widespread accepted ideal. "When they are able to participate with historians in the process of creating scholarship, community members can come to an understanding of how the past has shaped the community's present and how both past and present will affect its future," writes Laurie R. Serikaku, in "Oral History in Ethnic Communities: Widening the Focus," *Oral History Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 73.

[3] See Richard Bauman, "The Field Study of Folklore in Context," in Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Handbook of American Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 362-368.

As for oral history, we all know that too often written reports that merely recount personal histories (sometimes unfortunately polished by interviewers) can read flat, like a litany of misfortune, or worse, sensationalism or sentimentalism, without telling us anything about the subjects as creative, thinking, and feeling human beings. I am by no means the first person to note this. Ronald J. Grele, in an important 1975 essay, writes that "far too many [interviewers] are willing to settle for journalistic standards of usefulness. In many projects, too little time is devoted to the research necessary to prepare for an interview... Worse yet, ... sponsors often encourage this attitude and practice." Later on he adds that "fieldwork...means that not only can we come back again and again to our sources and ask them to tell us more, but we can also explore the varieties of historical visions in far greater detail and amid radically changing historical conditions." See Ronald J. Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in Ronald J. Grele, ed. *Envelopes of Sound* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, Inc., 1975), esp. pp. 130, 141.

[4]Margaret Mills, "Creative Expression and the Refugee Experience," in Mark O'Brien and Craig Little, eds., *Reimaging America: The Arts of Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), p. 46.

[5]The slow, methodical, painstaking process of research, however, often exists in tension with the virtues of immediacy. For example, there is a very real need to document the abuse of human rights and the murder of innocent people in any country. My argument to take more time shouldn't contradict the fact that it is often important and essential to get such testimony out quickly so that repression or war can be quickly stopped. I raise these questions here (which I cannot satisfactorily answer or even discuss) about the tensions between collecting and disseminating, and even larger questions about the nature of revealing texts and social change. Without equivocating, there are two dangers here. Slow, thorough, detailed research can overlook life or death questions facing refugee groups or cultures confronting genocide that demand immediate responses. Emergency reportage or quick, problem-oriented fieldwork can likewise do a disservice in the long run by flattening the subjects out into mere victims without identity, personality, or culture. Dividing the labor, between slow scholars and prompt policy-makers, does not seem to be an adequate solution, since an awareness of each pace and each objective can enrich the work no matter which is the stated mission.

[6] Mills, p. 46.

[7] Keith H. Basso, "'To Give Up on Words': Silence in Western Apache Culture," in *Western Apache Language and Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990 [originally published 1970]), p. 85.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

[9]Again, Portelli's article is instructive.

[10]Mills, pp. 45-6.

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